

FOUR POEMS

by

Tom McGrath

Tom McGrath was born on a farm in North Dakota, and has been a farm and shipyard worker, free-lance writer, and teacher: after war service in the Aleutians, he spent a year at Oxford, as a Rhodes scholar: several years later he was victimised for his political convictions, and lost his job at Los Angeles State College. Between spells of unemployment, he has found work as a board marker on the stock exchange and as a wood-worker in a factory making wooden animals. An associate editor of "Masses and Mainstream," he has won recognition as one of the outstanding writers of *the American Left*, his poetry ranging in mood from savage social satire to the lyrical and contemplative. These poems are taken from his last volume, "Figures from a Double **World**."

The Seven Stations of Mrs. D.

WAITING for the morning sickness of existence to pass
Mrs. D. put her head into the radio oven and turned
on the laughing gas,
And after a briefing by Dr. Malcolm Quandary
(The noted reporter who surveys each morning's boundary
For Lady Macbeth Soaps) she was hopped up enough to face
Her great American future, and unable any longer to stay in the
place

Anyway, Mrs. D. charged her moral battery and went out to see
What Mr. Luce and free enterprise might have hung on her 9 o'clock
Christmas tree.

But though the headlines proclaimed that she was ready for war
(And there were assurances by three cardinals and one whore)
Though the street was tree-proof and bird-proof, clean, shiny and
nice

Where civilization and sanitation had killed all but men and flies—

Still, something was terribly wrong. It seemed to Mrs. D.
That everything was properly accounted for. Then what could it be?
Was it love? A husband and a banking account were as good;

You had the Pope and the churches in exchange for God's body
and blood;

In place of hope, insurance; of knowledge, radio quizzes;
Of culture, a genteel sexy bestseller. Nevertheless it seemed to Mrs.

D. there had passed away a glory from the earth.

That it was involved with the packed subway and the three dollars
worth

Of sirloin steak in her shopping bag (whose meaty penumbra
She inhaled while behind her a man in experimental rhumba
Engaged herself and the century) Mrs. D. vaguely knew.

But the earth continually opened at her feet; there was nothing
she could do —

Poor Mrs. D—who lived on the high cold watershed
Between the few who are already living and the many who are
still dead;

And it was dangerous to think, to waken out of the dreams
Of steaks and assurances into a world where the screams
Might be one's own. Mrs. D. put away the intimations of
Responsibility and went home to hear Mr. Tedious talk about Love

On television. But meanwhile the carnival in her head
Went on. The madman in her mind's house, manic with dread,
Turned loose his fantasies, like live snakes in the hall,
While the years of her youth like ghosts, her suppressed instincts, all
Like drunken spastics and cripples, joined the riot upstairs.
Adrift and doomed on a vast and mapless Sargasso of despairs

Like a liner afire below decks, Mrs. D. sailed through the day
With her hatches battened. Oh ye who follow the historical way
To the freedom of necessity, who match idea and act,
Pity Mrs. D., who—in the fiction and fact
Of her incomplete consciousness, of too many things to unlearn,
Between the burning below and the riot above, knowledge and
instinct—finds nowhere to turn.

Fantastic Gentry Wakes Up Dead

WAKING without a personal sense of disorder
But aware he was dead, he saw the sun on high,
Light of the world, a natural. Time made hay
Of the clipt hours. A perfect day for the murder

Of Mr. Gentry, who, poised, holding his shoes,
Remembers he cannot put both on together,
That the process of setting one foot ahead of the other
Is life. But there is nothing in life that shows

Which one to put first, nothing to point direction
For Mr. Gentry, whose feet unspool the roads
Of routine destiny. Over his shoulder rides
His loosed and hawk-like soul—it screams distraction

(For it wishes to strike at the world) but is not heard
In the buzz buzz of conventional conversation,
And the day goes by. Secured beyond decision
Is the secret death of Gentry. And not so hard

As life, he reflects, while neither hope nor despair
Troubles his average day. Nothing again
Will move Gentry, whose heart in the long gone
Seasons of wish was haunted by fear and desire.

And who would have guessed that one day his loved world
Would have run down, whether from failure of loving,
(His own or someone's) fatigue, or because the living
Desire to en flesh the wish burns out in the cold ?

Observe him now, whose only life has destroyed:
Day after day driven past hope of solution
At last at peace. Or nearly. The heart will question,
Disturbing him often at night, asking: who is betrayed ?

Remembering That Island

REMEMBERING that island -lying in the rain
(Lost in the North Pacific, lost in time and the war)
With a terrible fatigue as of repeated dreams
Of running, climbing, fighting in the dark,
I feel the wind rising and the pitiless cold surf
Shaking the headlands of the black north.

And the ships come in again out of the fog —
As real as nightmare I hear the rattle of blocks
When the first boat comes down, the ghostly whisper of feet
At the barge pier—and wild with strain I wait
For the flags of my first war, the remembered faces,
And mine not among them to make the nightmare safe.

Then without words, with a heavy shuffling of gear,
The figures plod in the rain, in the shoreside mud,
Speechless and tired; their faces, lined and hard,
I search for my comrades, and suddenly—there—there—
Harry, Charlie, and Bob, but their faces are worn, old,
And mine is among them. In a dream as real as war

I see the vast stinking Pacific suddenly awash
Once more with bodies, landings on all beaches,
The bodies of dead and living go back to appointed places,
A ten year old resurrection,
And myself once more in the scourging wind, waiting, waiting
While the rich oratory and the lying famous corrupt
Senators mine our lives for another war.

Against the False Magicians

THE POEM must not charm us like a play:
See, in the war-torn city, that reckless gallant
Handsome lieutenant turn to the wet-lipped blonde
(Our childhood fixation) for one sweet desperate kiss
In the broken room, in blue cinematic moonlight —
Bombers across that moon, and the bombs falling,
The last train leaving, the regiment departing —
And their lips lock, saluting themselves and death:
And then the screen goes dead and all go home . . . ,
Ritual of the false imagination.

The poem must not charm us like the fact:
A warship can sink a circus at forty miles,
And art, love's lonely counterfeit, has small dominion
Over those nightmares that move in the actual sunlight.
The blonde will not be faithful, nor her lover ever return,
Nor the note be found in the hollow tree of childhood —
This dazzle of the facts would have us weeping
The orphaned fantasies of easier days.

It is the charm which the potential has
That is the proper aura for the poem.
Though ceremony fail, though each of your grey hairs
Help string a harp in the landlord's heaven,
And every battle, every augury,
Argue defeat, and if defeat itself
Bring all the darkness level with our eyes —
It is the poem provides the proper charm,
Spelling resistance and the living will,
To bring to dance a stony field of fact
And set against terror exile or despair
The rituals of our humanity.